DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 095 484 CS 001 278

AUTHOR Eisenhardt, Catheryn T.
TITLE The Structure of Meaning--A Linguistic Description.
PUB DATE May 74
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (19th, New Orleans, Louisiana, May 1-4, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Intonation; *Linguistics; Punctuation; Reading; *Reading Comprehension; Reading Development; *Reading Skills; Semantics; *Sentence Structure; Syntax; Vocabulary

ABSTRACT

Just as a reader must bring an experiential conceptual background to the printed page, so must he bring an ability to recognize the graphic cues that signal meaning. The graphic cues or structural meaning works as a system the description of which can be outlined in three parts as the vocabulary, the structure, and the sound. What has been neglected in the area of vacabulary is the concept that words alone do not carry precise meaning until they are placed in the structural and intonational system of the English language. An individual's sense of structure gives the written work meaning or determines how it means in contrast to what it means. Intonation functions as a controller of meaning. Generally speaking, the structural and intonational signals are not new. What is new is that this description of how meaning is structured is linked to the language that the child already knows intuitively so that the whole system can be taught without technical terminology at an early age and as the child is learning to read. What is also new is that this knowledge of the signals is not isolated as part of a spelling program or a grammar lesson but in the context of meaning in reading. (WR)

ED 095484

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Catheryn T. Eisenhardt

Professor Emeritus
Adjunct Faculty-Yavapai College, Arizona

Rolling Hills P.O.Box 274
Sedona, Arizona 86336

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Catheryn T. Eisenhardt
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

THE STRUCTURE OF MEANING - A LINGUISTIC DESCRIPTION

Nineteenth Annual IRA Convention
Friday May 3, 1974
3:45 - 4:45
Braniff Place

CS 001 278

Catheryn T. Eisenhardt
Rolling Hills P.O.Box 274
Sedona, Arizona 86336

THE STRUCTURE OF MEANING

Throughout the years, from McGuffy to read-at-your-own-rate boxed programs and paperbacks, teachers have been consumed by the never ending search for meaning. Whatever reading systems or method had been adopted, the goal of reading instructions was clear -- What does it mean? To accomplish this purpose, teachers have presented questions up and down the taxonomy from literal facts to judgments, comparisons, and critical evaluations. In this process, it became quite evident that the reader's experience with the resulting attitudes and value systems influenced the way he reacted to or perceived the printed material. The phrase, the more you bring to the printed page the more you take away, was and still is readily accepted. Realizing this, varied prereading activities and field trips have been designed to provide experiences that would sharpen the reader's understanding. Teachers are now broadening their own understanding of this concept by turning to the literature in the field of psycholinguistics.

But just as a reader must bring an experiential conceptual background to the printed page, he must also bring an ability to recognize the graphic cues that signal meaning. His language competence which he learned intuitively is still on the oral level, but how this language is recorded on the printed page presents a new challenge. We might refer to the conceptual or deeper level of meaning as What Does it Mean? and to the graphic cues or surface level as How Does it Mean?. The latter level is the subject of this paper.

Catheryn T. Eisenhardt
Rolling Hills P.O.Box 274
Sedona, Arizona 86336

The graphic cues or structural meaning works as a system the description of which can be outlined in three parts as 1. The Vocabulary, 2. The Structure, 3. The Sound.

Part 1, The Vocabulary, has been the workhorse of reading instruction. The word has been dissected, affixed, compounded, defined in and out of context, and recognized by the youngest student by its configuration. Words have been put into categories with such labels as homonyms and synonyms which constantly got mixed up with antonyms and cinnamon. Most of all, words have been served as the most important factor in readability formulas. What has been neglected is the concept that words alone do not carry precise meaning until they are placed in the structural and intonational system of the English language.

What is this system of structural clues? An examination of some examples may be the best way to clarify the idea. Read the following sentence which theoretically is far above your reading level as all the words will be strange to you.

The glubner's merdocks grabulated the dozziest morabness.

While you wouldn't do too well on a comprehension test because of the vocabulary block, you would find meaning, however, in the structure. If we were able to carry on a dialogue instead of being in the roles of reader and writer the following remarks would probably be made.

Catheryn T. Eisenhardt
Rolling Hills P.O.Box 274
Sedona, Arizona 86336

I know that merdocks must be the subject noun because it follows a possessive.
Why do you say it's the subject and not the object?
Because it precedes the verb, grabulated.
How do you know that grabulated is the verb?
Because it has a past tense ending.
How does dozziest function?
It must describe the noun morabness because it is placed before that noun and it has an adjective ending.
If I should add the word brumiously to the end of the sentence, what would you say about its function?
It tells me how the merdocks grabulated.
Why?
It has an ly ending
It could be an adjective like womanly, queenly, manly.
But an adjective wouldn't be found at the end of a sentence.

The above dialogue illustrated how we depend on word order and word form to give an order to the meaning of the words. Let's talk about it in another way by examining a signal string. The _____'s (2) _____s (1) _____ed (3) the _____est (5) _____ness (4) _____ly (6).
You may recognize this as the same sentence written without the words but with the word form signals only. The numbers are used for discussion reference. Now our reading would do something like this. There is something or somebody in the plural (1) that belongs to someone or something (2). This plural someone or something did something in the past (3) to someone or something (4) that could be described in the superlative degree (5) and it was done in a certain manner (6). Again, your sense of the structure gave you a meaning or How it Means in contrast to What it Means.

Catheryn T. Eisenhardt
Rolling Hills P.O.Box 274
Sedona, Arizona 86336

Now dig into the comprehension of a sentence that uses familiar content words. Note how many facts there are and how many of these facts are expressed not by the word but by the word order and the form of the word.
The teachers scolded the new principal.

1. Who? The teachers. (Word order. Subject position)
2. Whom did they scold? The principal (Word order. Object position)
3. When? In the past (Word form ed ending)
4. How many teachers? More than one. (Word form s ending)
5. How many principals? One (Word form. Lack of plural ending)
6. What kind of principal? New. (Word order. If placed in front of teachers, would change meaning)

If you are not yet convinced that word order changes meaning, read the following contrast sequences in which words are not changed but word order is.

The teacher sharpened the boy's dull pencil.
The teacher sharpened the dull boy's pencil.

light green. green light

former teacher's class. teacher's former class.

The teachers upstairs gave the program.
The teachers gave the program upstairs.

The third area, Intonation, functions as a controller of meaning as seen in the following examples.
1. Visualize two pictures, one of a garage that specializes in repairing wrecks, and the second a plastic model of a human body. Both pictures have the same caption, The Body Works. As you looked at the pictures, did you read the caption in the same way? You probably read the first as The Body Works and the second as The Body Works, and in doing this changed the meaning of the caption.

Catheryn T. Eisenhardt
Rolling Hills P.O.Box 274
Sedona, Arizona 86336

2. Try reading the following examples with the shift of stress as marked and decide whether meaning was changed in each reading.

Signal ahead	Signal ahead	(In which one would you perform an action?)
Short cut	Short cut	(Which one would save some walking?)
I hope you have a good time.		
I hope you have a good time.		(Which one sounds like an unhappy person?)

3. Read the following examples, inserting a pause where indicated. Ask the same question. Is the meaning changed by words, word order, word form or intonation?

Everything you see is too expensive.
Everything/ you see/ is too expensive.

Sally said no grandmother.
Sally said no/ grandmother.

A dull/ boy's knife
A dull boy's/ knife

Was Nixon the thirty-seventh president visiting China?
Was Nixon/ the thirty-seventh president/ visiting China?

4. In the above examples you paused in different places or read the words in different meaning groups and in this way changed the meaning. The following examples involve a change in the pitch which is lowering or raising the voice.

That's a dog	(A statement of fact)
That's a dog	(You're asking a question)
That's a dog	(It's so wretched looking you can't believe such a creature could really be a dog)
He can play tennis.	(Read as a statement of fact, a question, and then a reaction to a very poor performance on the court.)
You're smart	(Read it as a complement and then with a raised pitch in your voice accompanied by raised eyebrows.)

Intonation, as you've already discovered is often signalled

Catheryn T. Eisenhardt
Rolling Hills, P.O.Box 274
Sedona, Arizona 86336

by punctuation marks. This is true and suggests then that punctuation is related to the voice and so signals sound in an utterance just as letters signal sound in a word. There are some cases, however, where punctuation marks are not present yet the reader's interpretation sets the intonation pattern. This is very evident when different actors perform the same part in a play. Hamlet has been a different personality through the various performances yet Shakespeare's lines were not changed. Little children by their selected intonation pattern used in their classroom dramatizations have bestowed different personalities on such beloved characters as The Little Red Hen.

Not I, said the cat. (Said with arrogance? with laziness? or with fear?)
Then I shall plant the wheat myself, said the little red hen. (Said with a sigh and resignation to her martyrdom? or whining? or with determination?)

This early realization of the power of intonation expressed or not by punctuation signals, is valuable and necessary in the creative reading process.

Generally speaking, the above structural and intonational signals are not new. What is new is that this description of how meaning is structured is linked to the language that the child already knows intuitively so that the whole system can be taught without technical terminology at an early age and as the child is learning to read. What is also new is that this knowledge of the signals is not isolated as part of a spelling program or of a grammar lesson but in the context of meaning in reading. The syntactic competence derived from exercises in which the child creates and manipulates sentences provides a familiarity with the writing form and an ability to predict word group patterns as he reads.

Catheryn T. Eisenhardt
Rolling Hills P.O.Box 274
Sedona, Arizona 86336

So we look at the act of reading not only on the conceptual level which requires one set of teaching strategies but on the graphic cues level which is taught with another set of strategies. Let the How and the What of meaning be identified but combined in an appropriate balance for each child as he learns to read.